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AUTHOR Marsh, David
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ABSTRACT

The speaking ability of 40 Finnish college students of English as a Second Language was assessed in tests of interactional and transactional language function. In the interactional test, the learner introduced a topic of his choice and attempted to converse with two native speakers of English. In the transactional test, the learner watched a video clip from a television crime drama and produced a spoken narrative about what happens in the film. The tests were graded by both English and Finnish native-speaking teachers. Substantial differences were found in grades given to the same students by the different examiners. Based on these findings, it is argued that pragmatic breakdown has occurred between the first and second languages, and that it is sociopragmatic features, which stem from culture-specific perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behavior, that are the cause. How such different conventions interfere with understanding the intentions of a foreign language speaker is discussed. (MSE)

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INVALID TALK: REDUCTION OF PERSONALITY IN THE EVALUATION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE SPEAKING SKILLS

DAVID MARSH
Department of English
University of Oulu

ABSTRACT

Forty university-level Finnish learners of English are assessed according to their speaking abilities in tests requiring use of interactional and transactional language function. In the interactional test the learner introduces a topic of his/her own choice and attempts to converse with two native-speakers of English. In the transactional test the same learner watches a video clip from a TV crime drama and produces a spoken narrative about what happens in the film. The tests are graded by both English and Finnish native-speaker lecturers and startling differences are evident in the grades allocated for the same student by the different sets of examiners. It is argued that pragmatic breakdown between L1 and L2 has occured and that it is sociopragmatic features (which stem from culturally-specific perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour) which are the cause. How such different conventions interfere with understanding the intentions of a foreign language speaker are discussed in broader terms.

1. Introduction

Evaluation is the focus of much research and development in applied linguistics and foreign or second language teaching. This paper is not about the testing of spoken language so much as an expression of concern over some of the variables affecting such evaluation which raises a couple of questions.

Firstly, why do the variables create unexplained variations of scores for the same person at the same time in particular types of spoken language examinations? Secondly, is it variables such as these which provide impetus for the sort of degrading and very definitely invalid assertion which follows:

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> Finns are mere beggars of love and affection, deeply insecure persons unable to love and confront open conflicts. The results are clear: We are a humble subservient folk; We beat those who are weaker and lack the self-security to be tender... Sometimes we are explicitly sanctioned for showing our love, joy or hatred... People may get envious about your happiness... Envy, that's the main characteristic of the Finns. (Moore and Soto 1984).

This paper will discuss these two questions in relation to spoken language as it is taught and used in cross-cultural situations. It supports the argument that we understand the nature of language by looking at how it is used in communication, its pragmatic dimension.

2. The background

It may be useful to familiarise ourselves with some of the terms used in this paper. In using 'cross-cultural' we refer to the different groups that may operate within any given society or culture. In this way we can avoid referring to any particular nation or culture as having a specific set of pragmatic norms embodied in its language and used by its members. These groups may be localised in areas, professions, religions, cults, sub-cultures, etc. Thus we can see cross-cultural as being used to refer to communication between any people who do not share a common cultural background.

It is obvious that different groups of speakers differ in their choices of linguistic expression. For example, one group may not make contextualisation overt, whereas another may explicitly contextualise, filling in pronoun referents and background information, making assumptions, and using metalanguage, in other words comment on the talk itself. In pragmatic terms, different groups follow differing language delivery rules.

Within each society the symbols which comprise its cultural semiotic systems are, of course, in a continuous state of adjustment and alteration. Those changes represent important cultural and social processes, eg. those of struggles for power and the formation and reformation of networks of human relationships. And this movement is certain to be manifested at the pragmatic level.

Charles Saunders Peirce (1976) remarked: "It is a strange thing, when one comes to ponder over it, that a sign should leave its interpreter to supply a part of its meaning." Strange indeed but the hearer is required

to draw upon a wealth of world experience and knowledge of a general kind in order to make sense of individual words, utterances, discourse, non-verbal and paralinguistic features of language use.

3. The method

In this paper these points are discussed in relation to the evaluation of foreign language fluency. The focus will be on the ways in which a hearer decodes some of the pragmatic aspects of student-talk found in spoken language examinations at a university in Finland.

In this project 35 Finnish learners of English were assessed according to their fluency in the language. All the learners had been or were to be studying a foreign language other than English, such as French, German or Swedish.

The first test, called a 'Conversation Test', involved the student in conversation with two native-speakers of English on a subject of the student's choice for about ten minutes. The examiners evaluated each student performance and allocated a grade on a ten-point scale. The student talk was marked utterance by utterance.

Shortly after this conversation test the students were invited to sit a second test. They knew that their talk would be graded but these grades would not be filed. In this test the students first watched a five-minute video clip from a TV play by Alan Bleasdale. Before seeing the extract they were told that they were to be asked the question: Describe what happened as though you were in the role of a bystander/eyewitness. Immediately after seeing the film extract, which was predominantly a street scene, each student attempted to answer this question in the presence of a native-speaker of English. The English speaker provided non-verbal feedback and reinforcers.

4. The situation and function

The film extract opens with a street scene in which two social workers try to persuade a man, the father of three children, to allow access to his home. The children are in no immediate danger. This occurs whilst some police officers sit outside the house in a car. The man refuses entry for fear that the social workers will take his children away from him. The

police force an entry into the house, attack and brutally beat the man into submission. At the end of the clip a young child shoots at a policeman with an air rifle (ie. not wounding him seriously) and another child violently strikes a sympathetic social worker. Although shocked and angry the social workers present on the scene are unable to prevent the police violence being inflicted on the man.

It is an extract which is low in dialogue but high in action and drama.

The first test, the Conversation Test, draws on interactional skills. Interactional language function concerns the development and maintenance of social relations. It is listener-orientated and is the primary function of spoken language. One main purpose is the expression and enjoyment of shared experience. It is closely bound to the expression of personality and, thus, culture.

The second examination, the Narrative Test, draws on transactional skills. Transactional language function is essentially about the transfer of information from one source to another. The message is the reason for talking and the message must be understood by the hearer.

Interactional skills are the primary function of spoken language, and tend to serve a Private language function. Private language delivery tends to be unplanned and thus spontaneous to some extent. Its form is regarded as deviant from prestige language forms. Transactional skills serve a Public language function. Public language delivery is more likely to be rehearsed or planned and more likely to represent prestige language norms.

Pragmalinguistic differences between languages refer to the differing means that any language might have for conveying the degree of force in any particular illocution. Across cultures these may be found in the use of directives, apologies, requests, etc. Work has been done elsewhere in relation to pragmatic breakdown caused by pragmalinguistic differences between the Englishes and Finnish in which speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred, and these play a minor role in what is described here.

Sociopragmatic differences stem from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour. These might include ways of initiating and ending discourse, turntaking, treatment of silences in conversation and use of nonverbal signalling devices. Sociopragmatic features concern the social conditions placed on language use in any context.

5. The results

The conversation test was marked by two native speakers of English. Both exams were graded according to lexis, grammar, pronunciation, and content. The narrative test was marked by three sets of examiners: two native-speakers of English; two native-speakers of Finnish who had seen the film extract prior to grading and two who had not.

The results of these examinations reveal two curious features. On the one hand, there was often a considerable difference between the grade allocated for the same student in the conversation test and the narrative test. In one case this involved a difference of six points (out of ten). On the other hand, there was also a substantial difference between the grades allocated by the English and Finnish native-speakers for the narrative test. Many of these fluctuate up and down between the sets of scores. These differences indicated that it was not merely fluency in a foreign language that was being tested here but ability to perceive and adhere to certain social rules governing communicative context.

The sample was not large enough to produce a normal distribution curve, and the test variable was very low at 0.9128. However, differences exist between the scores and the reasons for these differences may lie with pragmatic breakdown between English and Finnish and differing concept of situation. Some of these are culture-bound and others are idiosyncratic.

6. Discussion

It appears that a few of the students who did particularly well in the conversation test may have been those who used certain interactional language forms, increasingly common in private language, such as semantic frames (which serve to signal that the stretch of an utterance is to be taken in a particular manner, eg. expressing opinions, convictions, personal viewpoints, evaluation); means of argumentation; or subject expansion; signals of social context (eg. turn-taking signals or state-of-consciousness signals indicating what a person is ready to do) and communication control signals (cf. Keller 1979).

The analysis of spoken discourse reveals that indeed these are features of spoken interaction, and the student who have used them have been credited accordingly. But a look at the reports of the student tests in which low grades were attained reveals startling statements:

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Student A: no initiation
B: not fast enough in delivery
C: making statements and not conversing
D: thoroughly unco-operative
E: no content to answer
F: shotgun delivery
G: rather passive
H: talks in short phrases
I: not very willing to elaborate beyond a sentence or two and needs prompting
J: not very convincing gestures
K: needs some prompting
L: slow and boring
M: hesitant, very Finnish

Let us take some quotes from the reports of the students who did noticeably better in the conversation test:

Student A: can fill up a silence
B: has quick reponses to questions
C: has good physical responses
D: is able to interrupt
E: is quick, lively and not wooden
F: is very talkative and carries the ball
G: shows interest
H: has good gestures

The argument here is simply this: As experienced language users the Finnish students are obliged to judge the parameters of the situation are the communicative context, and attend to the form of language that they deliver in the conversation test. The situation here appears to demand interactional, private use of language, and yet the context is far from suitable for the demands made of the student for interactional language delivery. This is evident in self-reporting statements made by students indicating the feeling of having one's personality on trial in the test.

The student is likely to be perplexed over the weighting of interactional and transactional functions because the situation is not clearly defined, and what is defined is often contradictory. In other words, how can conversation (private and interactional) be developed in a 10-point formal graded context? This pragmatic breakdown through mishandling of certain sociopragmatic rules between Finnish and English casts the validity of the test in some doubt.

Let us move to the students who scored substantially different results on the narrative test.

In the narrative test the student presumably knows what is expected: the message is the reason for talking and the message must be understood.

So why is there a difference between the evaluations by English- and Finnish-speaking examiners?

The student who describe the chain of events and talk about those events are those who do noticebly better on the English-speaker-evaluated narrative. Some also opened and closed the narrative with some comment on the film extract. Others provided opinions evaluating the conduct of the police, the social workers, the father and the children. Others compared the behaviour with that likely to be found in such a situation in the Scandinavian or Finnish context.

You will remember that the film extract depicted police behaviour which was clearly unneccesarily violent with a corresponding lack of interference by the social workers on the scene. The bait was there and and the fish that bit were rewarded; they interpreted the events although they were not explicitly asked to do so. Remember the question put to the students was a demand to recall the chain of events leading to the children being taken away by the social workers. Comment on the moral and ethical implications of the action taken by the authorities was not requested. Some students provided that meta-comment and were duly rewarded and some did not. These differences are probably due to different definitions of the narrative being performed and these are probably sociopragmatic.

In reference to Erving Goffman, Deborah Tannen (1980) suggests that such inclusion of meta-comment in narrative is a particularly North American phenomenon. Could it be that even though the context in which the narrative was produced was carefully controlled and defined we still have sociopragmatic problems occuring?

Goffman writes (1959) that any verbal performance is an exercise in the presentation-of-self. Is this what the English examiners regard as icing on the cake whilst the Finnish examiners do not regard that cake as needing icing? In turn does this not cast doubt on the way in which such tests are carried out? The implications of this may go far in relation to the evaluation of language use in all its different forms.

Within each culture there are groups which respect and follow different cultural and social systems. A language belongs to each and everyone who uses it. Each user tints it in some way or another, and this usually adds to the wealth and scope of that language.

Sociopragmatic breakdown is not so much a case of a producer being necessarily 'wrong', 'rude', or 'shotgun', but perhaps the interpreter being ignorant and displaying prejudice. And when such persons have the authority to judge the linguistic performance of another then they may be

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unwittingly abusing the power bestowed upon them. Correct, permissable and appropriate language usage are terms that some practioners in the field need to re-evaluate. Recent developments in pragmatics enable them to do so.

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